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Social Equality in the Competition State?

Danish education policy under the Thorning-Schmidt government, 2011-15

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Introduction

The coalition government consisting of the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's party and the Social Liberal party with Helle Thorning-Schmidt as prime minister took office in October 2011, after a narrow election victory. The platform of the new government was characterized by tensions between on one hand ambitions to improve social equality and welfare, on the other hand ambitions to consolidate the Danish economy and competitiveness through a pragmatic economic policy. Education was a key element in the government platform, which emphasized investment in education both as a way to improve employment and competitiveness and as a way to reduce social inequality.

The Thorning-Schmidt government led a difficult life. There were clear tensions between the three parties, especially between the Socialist People's Party (SF) and Social Liberals (RV) in issues of economic policy. A year after the election the leader of the SF left his post after increasing internal criticism and in January 2014 the SF left government due to a conflict over the proposed sale of shares in the public company DONG Energy to the Goldman Sachs investment bank. In the general election in June 2015 the parties supporting the Thorning-Schmidt government lost by a narrow margin and the Liberal party formed a minority government, Lars Løkke Rasmussen returning as prime minister.

In spite of its problems the Thorning-Schmidt government was very active in launching reforms, not least in the field of education. Two major educational reforms were proposed, negotiated and implemented; a reform of primary and lower secondary education ("Folkeskole") and a reform of vocational education. Several smaller reforms were also been introduced, including one in higher education.

In this paper I will give an overview of the education policy pursued by the Thorning-Schmidt government, including its general objectives, the reforms and the positioning in relation to the liberal-conservative opposition. I will try to trace how the government interpreted problems and necessary interventions in Danish education in relation to economic consolidation on one hand, social equality and welfare on the other. I will also to some extent try to assess the government initiatives.

1. Framework

1.1. Assessing education policy

There is a comprehensive literature on education policy evaluation. However, most of it concerns the implementation and/or effects of specific reforms, programmes or institutions and the methodology of evaluating this. The focus of this paper is broader and less ‘technical’. No doubt parts of the existing literature will be relevant to draw on, but in this preliminary version of the analysis I will but just comment on the two basic issues of criteria and evidence.

What criteria should be used in analysing and assessing the education policy of a specific government in a democratic political system like the Danish? Several types of criteria can be relevant, including:

- The stated goals of government. These will normally be available in the form of a more or less detailed government programme or platform containing general priorities and listing initiatives in different policy areas.
- The political ideologies and the programmes of the parties forming the government. In the government platform objectives will be adjusted to the current situation and possibilities while the political ideology represents the more general and long-term goals.
- A research-based analysis of the challenges the government has to face and the resources room of manoeuvre available. Such analysis may be necessary because governments are not always able to assess their situation, and even if they are they may not be able to state it publicly because of pressure from the media and public opinion.

What empirical evidence can be drawn on? In principle the outcomes of educational reforms can be evaluated, and results from such evaluations can be compared with the stated objectives of government. But it notoriously difficult to separate the effects of policy initiatives from the effects of other contextual factors, and this is further complicated by the fact that many reforms are intended to achieve their objectives over a longer period, for instance 5 or 10 years. The first reforms of the Thorning-Schmidt government were only decided in 2012, and the government lasted until a year ago. Still, there may be relevant information and research available about outcomes.

A less ambitious approach is to look at the government’s initiatives, decisions and arguments. Such information may indicate whether government has tried to follow up priorities from its platform and whether it acts and argues in line with the ideology or ideologies of the parties forming government.

In the present paper the main basis for assessment is the stated goals of government, and the empirical evidence is mainly a listing and description of reforms and initiatives. But in some instances I also include comments (more or less critical) based on my general knowledge of the state of Danish education.

1.2. Social equality, welfare and competition

Denmark has a political culture and tradition with an emphasis on collaboration and pluralism, both in national and local matters. The fact that Denmark managed during the 19th century to complete the transformation from absolutism to representative democracy without major conflicts is no doubt part of the background for this. During the 20th century coalition government was the rule rather than the exception, and in the post-war period most governments have been formed by the Social Democratic party in combination with different liberal partners (Kaspersen 2013). In recent

coalition governments a new style has emerged, where coalitions are based on comprehensive platforms with political objectives and plans, and where the government's credibility towards voters is based on its ability to follow up these objectives and plans. These 'contract politics' were first introduced by the Liberal-Conservative Fogh Rasmussen government of 2001.

The political ideologies in Danish politics are not fundamentally different from other western nations, although they have adapted themselves to the historical and cultural context. In relationship to educational policy-making the main ideologies may be characterised as follows (Rasmussen 2002):

<i>Political ideology</i>	<i>Core value</i>	<i>Core form of control</i>
Liberal	Freedom	Market
Conservative	Tradition	Authority
Social Democratic: Focus on distribution	Equality	Corporatist
Social Democratic: Focus on culture	Community, equity	Democracy "from below"

The understanding of social equality is a key element in these different ideological positions. Both liberals and conservatives accept equality as a positive value, although not the most important one. But to them equality is a question of individual opportunity, which may be limited both by personal ability and the need to respect the more important values of freedom and market. In this understanding it is natural that smarter individuals from more resourceful families have better opportunities and a more equal overall distribution of wealth and welfare is not a goal.

Social democrats see social equality as a higher value, and maintain that education should lead to a more equal distribution of wealth and welfare. There are however different social democratic interpretations of the significance of education for social equality. One focuses on equality of distribution. Here education is mainly seen as a good or a service to which all members of society should have equal access. In order to achieve social justice, the goods of education should be redistributed in the same way that incomes or housing goods should be redistributed. Some versions link the equality of distribution strongly to work and employment. This argument was for instance formulated by Jencks in his classic study of inequality: *'The case for equalising the distribution of schooling and cognitive skills derives not from the idea that we should maximise consumer satisfaction, but from the assumption that equalising schooling and cognitive skill is necessary to equalise status and income'* (Jencks 1975, p. 11).

Other interpretations focus more on culture and citizenship. Here education is seen as a cultural resource that makes it possible for individual and social groups to shape and improve their competencies, activities and identities. In this way education promises not only access to resources, but also a better and fuller life.

The different interpretations of social equality are present in social democratic social democratic ideology. The differences should not be exaggerated, but they are important to remember. In Denmark the Socialist People's Party has had a strong commitment to the cultural dimension.

Denmark is a welfare state with a strong emphasis on public provision of welfare, generally funded through taxes. Health services, social security, education and other services are organized by the state and mostly freely available to the individual citizen. Some elements of market-based provision,

inspired from New Public Management, have gradually been introduced, and the level of taxation is often discussed, but the basic principles of the welfare state are still supported from most political quarters. The Danish labour market system can be described as highly organised both on the employers' and the employee side with widespread co-operation and consensus between trade unions and employers and their organisations and nation-wide collective agreements. Collaboration between the social partners and the state has been an important feature in the development of vocational education and labour market training.

The worldwide economic and social changes that are often called globalisation have been changing the conditions of national welfare policy and Danish governments have been trying to tune welfare policy to face this challenge. An important initiative was the so-called Globalisation Council, convened by the liberal-conservative Fogh Rasmussen government in 2005-2006 and including key decision-makers from government, business and the social partners. The approach developed in this task force was stated like this:

“We must use the possibilities that globalisation gives us. We must assert ourselves in competition on international markets (...). We run the risk that in the tougher competition we may not be able to uphold our position among the richest countries in the world, because other countries will overtake us. And we run the risk that globalisation may split up Danish society, because not everyone has the education and the flexibility to do well in the labour market (...). For these reasons we should strengthen our competitive power and our cohesion” (Danish Globalisation Council 2005, p 5).

This represents what political scientists have called ‘the competition state’ (Cerny 2010, Pedersen 2013). It calls for the state to focus on the development of the political, economic, and cultural institutions that gives a country the capacity to achieve socioeconomic success. Such institutional competitiveness is seen as increasingly important compared to traditional macroeconomic policies. In pursuing institutional competitiveness, a state will strive to coordinate policies and actors in different areas in the framework of national strategies, increase the ability and motivation of individuals to work and undertake continuous change and improvement through benchmarking and diffusion of best practise from international organisations.

The competition state approach is strongly present in the mainstream of Danish politics. This presence was made explicit by Bjarne Corydon, the Minister of Finance in the Thorning-Schmidt government in interviews given in August 2013, where he stated that Social Democratic policy was aligned with the realities of the competition state and that this meant more focus on investment in education and less on public benefits.

1.3. The Danish education system

In Denmark primary and lower secondary education is organized in the form of a comprehensive public school system (the ‘Folkeskole’). There is 10 years of mandatory schooling, starting at the age of 6 and ending at the age of 16 with school-leaving examinations. The curriculum covers the basic subjects known from other school systems such as national language and culture, mathematics and science, foreign languages, history and geography. The legislative framework is decided by the state, but schools are run and funded by the municipalities. After finishing mandatory schooling students can move on to upper secondary education or leave the education system. They also have the option of staying in the ‘Folkeskole’ for an extra year, and many do that while they try to decide what to choose.

In upper secondary education Denmark has retained a system of distinct sectors with one system (the 'Gymnasium') giving general and academic schooling as preparation for higher education while another sector provides vocational schooling including technical programmes, commercial programmes and programmes social and health work. From time to time there have been attempts to create a more comprehensive structure for secondary education, but they have not succeeded. Most types of vocational education in Denmark are based on the "dual system" where school-based training alternates with practical training in workplaces. The social partners, trade unions and employer's organisations have traditionally been and are still strongly involved in the governance of vocational study programmes.

The tradition of distinct sectors also characterises higher education in Denmark. The university sector is composed of a relatively small number of institutions which teach and do research at the highest level. Some universities specialise in single professional fields (like engineering, business studies and pharmacy), but in most cases professional education at the higher education level is located in non-university institutions. Earlier there were many such institutions, linked to different fields of professional practice, but they have been merged into large and comprehensive institutions called university colleges. Training of teachers for primary schools (up to the age of 16) takes place in these colleges, while teachers for academic upper secondary schooling are educated at universities.

1.4. National and transnational forces

As evidenced by the Globalisation council quoted above national education policy is characterized by an increasing attention to international conditions, trends and inspirations. Much of this attention is mediated by trans-national organizations that Denmark participates in, the EU and the OECD. These are two very different organizations; the EU is a framework for binding economic, monetary and political collaboration including most European countries; OECD is a looser association including countries outside Europe, aimed at developing policy through debate and knowledge production.

For most of its existence the EU did not interfere too much with educational policies. This issue was clearly not covered by the EC treaties, and many member states including Denmark were strongly opposed to any attempt at cross-national coordination of policies. The main educational impact of the EU was in two areas not directly related to educational structures or curricula: EU-funded exchange and development schemes in education and mutual recognition of educational qualifications. From the middle of the nineties the European Commission moved towards the development of common educational policies, and education became an important element in the Lisbon strategy and the subsequent Europe 2020 strategy.

In contrast to the EU, the business of the OECD is not institutional regulation, but formulating, transferring, selling and teaching certain principles or causal beliefs, which help to constrain or enable certain types of social behaviour within the OECD area. This is not an evenly distributed process; inside the OECD there are regular streams of ideas from the North to the South and from the Anglo-Saxon group of members to the rest. Some of the instruments used (like the public international peer review) are very effective in influencing behaviour of member states. OECD has worked with education issues from early in its existence; a centre for educational research and innovation (CERI) was created at an early stage and regular reviews of education policies in member states have been undertaken. But the most visible and influential part of OECDs work in education has been trans-national surveys of skills and learning, especially the PISA surveys

initiated in 1997. In Denmark like in many other countries PISA results have played an important role in educational debate and policy.

The EU and the OECD are different types of transnational organisations, but in the field of education their policy messages are often remarkably alike, representing a shared hierarchy of values.

Transnational influences on Danish education policy differ according to sectors. The 'Folkeskole' has traditionally been a national reserve, sometimes influenced by international pedagogical trends (like progressivism or curriculum theory) but with little transnational influence at the policy level. This has changed, and today there is strong influence from international organisations and surveys (especially the PISA surveys) on policy debate and priorities. This has led to a focus on standards, assessment and testing. In vocational education there has been very little substantial influence; this may partly be due to the corporatist organisation of vocational programmes. In contrast, changes in higher education are strongly influenced and mediated through transnational policies and actors. The most important element is the Bologna process, which is formally an independent programme of collaboration but strongly linked to the EU. Also higher education institutions, especially universities, are continuously involved in international competition, expressed for instance in ranking lists.

2. The Thorning-Schmidt government platform

After the narrow election victory in September 2011 the three coalition parties developed a platform entitled 'A Denmark that stands together' and formed government with Thorning-Schmidt as prime minister. Christine Antorini, a Social Democrat, became Minister for Children and Teaching, and Morten Østergaard, a Social Liberal, became Minister for Education and Research.

The production of the platform was a long and difficult process. Before the election, the two socialist parties had collaborated on developing a programme of social reform. The social liberals had not been part of this; they supported Thorning-Schmidt as prime minister, but were expected to be a coalition partner with limited influence. The election result changed this, as both socialist parties lost votes and places in parliament while the social liberals gained a significant victory. Their approach to economic policy was much more liberal, and this strongly influenced the government platform (Qvortrup 2015).

The platform included political issues and objectives in many fields, but the main emphasis was on improving the state of the Danish economy. The impact of the global financial crisis increased unemployment and social inequality in Denmark and had also highlighted serious structural weaknesses in the economy. The crisis also continued in the Eurozone as the EU tried to control public spending and deficit in the member states. The platform states that the new government will take responsibility for re-starting economic growth and improving employment through measures of modernization. Many policy areas are linked to this agenda, including education.

The platform listed nine overriding goals for the Danish economy. They included public budget balance, compliance with the EU Stability and Growth Pact (which includes limiting public debt), improving productivity as well as salary competitiveness and increasing labour supply. Goal no. 7 concerned education:

“Investments in research and education: 95 per cent of a youth cohort must take and complete an upper secondary education programme; 60 per cent of a youth cohort must take and complete a higher education programme by 2020. 25 per cent of a youth cohort must take and complete a long-cycle higher education programme by 2020. In addition, more young people must take and complete a vocational education and training (VET) programme. In addition, opportunities must be improved to enable unskilled persons to take a competence development training programme later in life” (Government platform 2011, p 8).

The final goal on the list concerned social equality. It stated that *“The Government wishes to be measured on its ability to reduce poverty and ensure genuine equal opportunities”*.

These priorities were described further in the section of the platform concerned with education. Here the importance of education for the economy was repeated, but a broader view was also found, for instance in this statement:

“A higher level of education provides a solid foundation for the whole development of society. Education is also a crucial preparation for participating as a critical and active citizen in a living democracy in a globalized world” (p 16).

The new government signalled its intention to implement a reform of the ‘Folkeskole’ and described this reform at length. A number of aims were listed, among them:

- Improving school management. The local ‘Folkeskole’ managers were said to have a crucial task.
- Making sure that more students are included in ordinary classes and not segregated into special teaching
- Strengthening the incentives for municipalities to establish schools where learning, physical activity and social activities could be integrated in a coordinated all-day process.

For upper secondary education the platform called for higher quality in order to achieve the goal of having 95 pct. of a cohort completing education at this level. Special focus was to be on vocational programmes, where government would implement measures to make more internships available in order to prevent drop-out from the programmes. For higher education programmes as well as for vocational programmes the new government argued that young Danes take longer to complete education than young people in many other countries and that government would provide incentives for young people to start and complete education faster.

In the field of higher education the platform said that all higher education programmes would now be placed in the ministry for research and innovation (in contrast to previous practice, where only the university programmes had been in this ministry, while the short-cycle and medium-cycle programmes had been placed in a ministry of education together with primary and secondary education). The university colleges and their profession bachelor programmes were to be given a stronger role in the system of higher education and the opportunity to have dedicated research funds.

In sum the two main characteristics of education policy in the platform were the emphasis on the economic benefits of education and the announcement of a reform of the ‘Folkeskole’.

3. Education policy initiatives

3.1. The administrative organization

As stated in the platform, the government established a new administrative organization of education policy. The previous ministry of education was re-named 'Children and teaching'; in addition to primary and secondary education, the pre-school sector was transferred to this ministry from the ministry of social affairs. Adult education was also the responsibility of this ministry. The previous ministry of research and innovation was renamed 'Research, Innovation and Higher Education' and now included institutions and programmes at all levels of higher education. This signalled the intention of the new government to pursue more integrated and transversal policies, both in primary and in higher education.

3.1. Primary and lower secondary schooling

The 'Folkeskole' reform was the key issue for the new government. It was preceded by two initiatives, a comprehensive innovation program and an act on inclusion.

The innovation programme was called the 'New Nordic School'. It involved many Danish schools in educational development and focused on themes also envisaged for the general reform; a longer and more flexible school day, combining teaching and daycare, establishing links between lower and upper secondary education and between schools and their local communities (Andreasen et al 2013a). These themes signaled a clear difference from the previous Liberal-Conservative government, which had focused more on free school choice and standards.

The other initiative was to include most children with learning difficulties, who had previously been taught in special classes, in ordinary classes. This had been prepared in previous years, where Denmark had signed international conventions about the right of all children to optimal teaching, but the Thorning-Schmidt government initiated an implementation of the principle. The act on inclusion was passed in parliament in 2012 with support from the liberals and the conservatives. It specified that children needing less than 12 hours special teaching a week would no longer be taught in special classes but in the ordinary classes, where the teachers would receive appropriate assistance. Although the principle of inclusion was widely supported, the reform was still controversial. Many teachers argued that the transition was too radical and that it would make teaching much more difficult and reduce the quality for ordinary students. It was also argued that the reform was in fact motivated by the need to reduce municipality expenditure on schooling (Lund 2013).

In December 2012 government then presented its full reform proposal for the 'Folkeskole'. Generally the reform followed the ideas from the government platform. Achievement should be improved to the maximum of the ability of all students and the impact of social background on achievement should be reduced (Regeringen 2012, p 11). For children and young people in school a longer and more coordinated school day should be established, including teaching but also play, physical activity and assistance for homework. Teachers and day-care educators should collaborate on this. More teaching should be provided, especially in reading, writing and mathematics, but also in practical and creative subjects. Professional development schemes should be provided for of teachers, pedagogical staff and school principals.

It is an established tradition in Denmark that legislation on the 'Folkeskole' should be based on broad political settlements, and government invited all parties to negotiations on the reform. It

quickly became clear that the opposition – with the Liberals as the major party – cared little about the integration of different activities in a longer school day but gave strong priority to raising standards. This was argued from concerns for Danish students' level of achievement that over the years have been fed by the PISA surveys and other international comparisons. The PISA results have generally ranked Denmark among the mid-level OECD countries, and this is too low for Danish politicians and public opinion. PISA results also highlight the issue of low achievers who may lack the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for modern citizens. Expert opinion on the magnitude of this has been divided, but the problem tends to be exaggerated because of focus on the rankings in the media and public debate. Under the previous liberal-conservative government such concerns led to the introduction of more exams in the 'Folkeskole' and a system of national tests. It is noticeable that these measures were not changed in the reform proposal, despite the fact that parts of the Thorning-Schmidt coalition, especially the Socialist People's Party, had earlier criticised them.

The reform was passed in the summer of 2013 and was characterized by unsolved dilemmas. The government proposal had tried to balance improvement of teaching in core subjects (literacy, math, science) with time and space for creative and day-care activities; but the compromise achieved in parliament gave priority to the core subjects and to homework.

As part of the reform government wanted to change the distribution of teacher work, so that teachers spent more time in classrooms and less on preparation and other associated tasks. Here the Thorning-Schmidt government continued a policy pursued also by the previous government, arguing that teachers (not only in the Folkeskole, but also in upper secondary education) use too many of their working hours on tasks outside the school premises (preparation, correcting assignments, meeting parents etc.) and demanding that they must spend more time teaching in the class. Governments have insisted that research supported this, but in fact research evidence has been ambiguous. This led to a curious episode when the Ministry of Education claimed that a recently finished international study confirmed that more teaching hours in a given subject improved achievement, and the Danish researchers actually involved in the study then stated that this was not the case (Andreasen et al 2013b). There is no doubt, however, that the government's rhetoric drew on and in turn strengthened widespread assumptions about teachers and their work.

At the same time that the school reform was being finalised collective negotiations for public sector employees were taking place. Here the municipalities – employers for the teachers – insisted that previous general agreements about preparation time for teaching should be abolished and that the local managers should have the authority to decide the allocation of work time for different teacher tasks. Negotiations were unsuccessful and conflict ensued as the municipalities took the step of lock-outing teachers. After some weeks the state intervened and imposed a framework mainly based on the suggestions of the municipalities. In many ways this marked a turning away from the Danish tradition where The Ministry of Education lays down general curricular aims and guidelines and the municipalities and local school managers are responsible for the implementation, but with considerable influence for the teachers and the teachers' union on the practice level. The framework severely restricts the individual teachers' right to plan and organize teaching. For many teachers this led to disillusion and estrangement, a feeling that was increased by the fact that the intervention in established collective agreements had been done by a government led by social democrats.

No doubt a partial reorganization of school management was relevant in order to improve flexibility and collaboration, but implementing this through a conflict with the teacher union and through state intervention biased many teachers against the reform. This could still be felt when implementation of the reform started in the summer of 2014 and through the rest of the Thorning-Schmidt government's time in office. The implementation of the reform seems otherwise to have proceeded relatively well (see for instance Bæk 2016). One element that has given difficulties is the longer and more varied school day, because the combination of homework assistance, leisure activity and collaboration with local organisations has been difficult for many schools.

In sum, the 'Folkeskole' reform was a serious attempt to provide a better school, including many innovative elements; but it was weakened by the concessions made to the liberal-conservative opposition in the political negotiations and especially by combining its implementation with demands that provoked a labour conflict with teachers.

3.2. Vocational upper secondary education

Danish vocational education is based on a so-called dual or sandwich model, where practical training in companies alternates with theoretical and practical teaching in vocational schools. There is general agreement that this type of education, combined with a governance model giving much influence and responsibility to the social partners, produces high quality skills, both in technical, commercial and social sectors. However, vocational education in Denmark has been facing significant challenges in recent years. Still fewer young people choose vocational education after primary school, and one out of three students enrolled is 25 years or older. In 2006 29.1 pct. of all students choose to enrol in a VET education directly after lower secondary school, but in 2011 only 21.8 pct. enrolled (Ministeriet for Børn, Ligestilling og Undervisning 2016). Only half of the students enrolled in vocational education in recent years completed a vocational degree. Many students have difficulty in finding an internship in a company.

In its platform the Thorning-Schmidt government had stated that it would make more internships available for vocational education, and it took steps to do so. The vocational education legislation includes the possibility of establishing school-based practical training for students who do not succeed in securing an internship in a company. Government established 'internship centres' at vocational schools with the aim of improving quality of school-based training and coordinating it better with company-based internships. But government went further. In the fall of 2013 it proposed a comprehensive reform of vocational education with the purpose of reversing the trend of falling enrolments. The aims of the reform were to have 25 pct. of a cohort (rising to 30 pct. in 2025) commence a vocational programme directly after lower secondary school and to improve the completion rate to 60 pct. (rising to 67 in 2025). The reform also aimed to improve the social status of VET through enrolment based on school grades, and it established a common framework/institutional structure for all vocational education programmes.

The Danish model of vocational education has the inherent problem that it makes education dependent on training capacity in business. The reform tried to meet the challenges of falling enrolments and high dropout rates without compromising the basic model. A core argument for the reform was the prediction that Denmark will soon lack skilled workers because too many young people have been seduced by the knowledge society rhetoric and have turned away from education preparing for practical and manual work. The reform proposal itself did not try to substantiate this argument; projections of manpower needs have mostly come from the social partners or from think tanks sponsored by them (see for instance AE-rådet 2011, chapter 4).

The reform was welcomed by the main actors of vocational education (employers, trade unions, vocational schools) who all want to improve the societal status of vocational programmes. As part of this attempt the reform also introduced a minimum grade of 02 in Danish and math from the 'Folkeskole' leaving exam as condition for enrolment in vocational education. Whether this would in fact help attract more of the young people currently choosing general/academic programmes was much debated; but it was clear that it would exclude a group of the young people who leave the 'Folkeskole' without the necessary minimum grade. A research report estimated that compared to previous enrolment some 4000 students each year would be kept out of vocational programmes by this element of the reform (Hvidtfeldt & Tranæs 2013). The introduction of a common framework/institutional structure for all vocational education programmes met criticism from the actors responsible for the commercial streams of vocational education, because these programmes have earlier been more school-based than technical education and the reform severely reduced the amount of schooling available in the programmes.

To supplement the vocational education reform government established a new secondary education programme called the combined youth education programme. This is a special 2-year programme for young people (15 to 24 years) who are not able to complete an ordinary upper secondary education programme because they lack of the necessary qualifications. The young people supposed to attend this program are motivated for vocational education and training, but without realistic possibility of being able to complete a normal VET education, or take advantage of using other established programmes. The combined youth education programme aims to give the young people an education that suits their needs and increases their opportunities for jobs and livelihood. The programme has been criticized for being narrow in the sense that it is focused on 'the shortest path to employment' more than on the opening of educational pathways through support, training and guidance and counselling. It is hard to see that the programme should represent any improvement on existing types of provision which includes the production schools and the individualised basic VET programme (EGU).

3.3. General upper secondary education

General upper secondary education in Denmark is generally called (following German tradition) the 'gymnasium' and is schooling for the 16-19 year group, preparing them for higher education. The curriculum includes the major academic subjects such as Danish literature and language, history, mathematics and science and foreign languages, but also music and sports. Most students attend the stx programme, but there are actually three more programmes: the HF, a 2-year programme originally developed to allow older students to take the primary 'gymnasium' subjects; and the hhx and htx, programmes tailored to commercial and technical higher education respectively. In contrast to vocational education, general upper secondary education has been attracting a more and more young people. Of the young people coming from lower secondary education in 2006 61.5 pct. enrolled in general upper secondary education; in 2011 this figure had risen to 70.7 pct. (Ministeriet for Børn, Ligestilling og Undervisning 2006). This contrasts strongly with the 'gymnasium's' historical role of being an elite education for the best and brightest, and it has provoked complaints from universities and 'gymnasium' teachers about falling standards and other issues.

General upper secondary education was not an important element in the educational agenda of the Thorning-Schmidt government. Instead the government focused on reforming vocational education in order to make more young people choose the vocational path rather than the 'gymnasium'. But the government also saw the need for changes in general upper secondary education, and in

December 2014 it presented its proposal 'The Gymnasium for the Future – Ready to Study On' (Regeringen 2014). The proposal introduced objectives reflecting the government's general policy, for instance that schools should 'challenge all students to become as skilled as they are able to' and that schools should 'lessen the impact of social background on their achievement'. It was not presented as a radical reform, rather as a 'service check' to take care of imperfections and new challenges that had appeared since the previous reform of this sector ten years earlier. Government suggested to reduce the number of specialisations, provide more hours of teaching (like in the 'Folkeskole') and more feedback on students' written work, make sure that almost all students acquired mathematics competence at a level necessary for higher education, and to introduce a minimum grade from lower secondary education (the same as for vocational education, 02 in Danish and math) as a condition for enrolment.

Despite the moderate character of the proposal the opposition parties objected strongly. They found that the minimum grade proposed was too low and demanded at least 04 in Danish and math as condition for enrolment. Despite lengthy negotiations in the spring of 2015 no agreement could be reached, and no changes were introduced. It should be remembered that general elections were to take place no later than September that year, and this may have limited the eagerness to reach a compromise.

3.4. Higher education

The goal set in the government platform was that 60 pct. of young people should complete a higher education degree and by 2020. Danish higher education includes programmes at three levels; 2-3 year professional programmes run mainly by business academies; 3-4 year professional bachelor programmes run by university colleges and the long-cycle programmes run by universities, which consist mainly of 3-year academic bachelor programmes followed by 2-year master programmes. The government platform specified that 25 pct. should complete a long-cycle degree by 2020.

In 2011, when the Thorning-Schmidt government took office, the forecasts of the ministry (the so-called 'profile model') said that 61 pct. of the 16 year olds would complete a higher education and 28 pct. would complete a long-cycle higher education the within 25 years (Uddannelses- og forskningsministeriet 2015). These figures might suggest that the goals in the government platform had already been achieved; but the fact that the figures were to be achieved by 2020 made the government's goals quite ambitious.

Earlier higher education was administratively divided, the university programmes being located in the Ministry of Research and other programmes in the Ministry of Education. As noted earlier the Thorning-Schmidt government located all higher education in one ministry (see section 3.1) and focused on developing a common framework for higher education at universities and university colleges. The purpose was to improve coherence in the higher education system, ensure flexibility and avoid deadlocks.

This common framework must be characterised as a positive reform which had in fact been needed for many years. It promised to improve the overall coherence of higher education, make it easier for students to find their way and make it easier for government to facilitate a balanced development of the different sectors and levels of programmes and institutions. It could also improve the attractiveness of the shorter professional programs run by business academies and university colleges because students would stop fearing that these programmes are specialized 'dead ends'.

A further administrative initiative was a change in the system of accreditation for higher education, which had been introduced in 2007. The system operated with not only accreditation of new higher education study programmes but also recurrent accreditation of all study programmes. By the educational institutions this was perceived as a considerable bureaucratic workload with few real benefits in terms of education quality, and this had been evident in the evaluation of the 2004 university and in other contexts (Universitets- og Bygningsstyrelsen 2010). The government then took initiative to change the system, so institutions were accredited instead of study programmes. This would of course reduce the number of accreditations to be undertaken. The new system was introduced in 2013 with the backing of all political parties.

A main initiative by the government was a reform of the Danish student grant (SU) system (Regeringen 2013). The level of grants offered by the state is very reasonable and higher than in many other countries, but the growing number of higher education students means that funding the system demands a significant part of overall educational expenditure. The reform, generally called the 'Progress reform' consisted of measures to save educational expenditure by getting students faster and better through the education system. One element was demands on study and exam activity for the students to obtain the SU grants, another was a strict framework for progression through the study programmes. For instance students who started a given study year of a programme were to be automatically registered for all exams of this year, and they were not allowed to opt out from any of the exams.

The progress reform provoked much debate and objections from students and higher education institutions; but it was passed in parliament without much debate. However the reform represented a very narrow approach, leaving students too little leeway for pursuing their own study strategies, and it gave the institutions many practical problems. It showed that the government concerned itself much with having students finish as quickly as possible and less with the actual learning.

Two expert groups came to significantly influence the Thorning-Schmidt government's higher education policy. One was the Productivity Commission, established by government early in 2012 to investigate the relatively slow growth of Danish productivity and suggest remedies; the other was the Task Force for Quality and Relevance in Higher Education (generally called the Quality Task Force), established by the Ministry of Education and Research in the fall of 2013. Both groups were relatively small (9 and 7 members respectively) and had economists in a leading role

A main focus in the work of the Productivity Commission was how public sector reforms could improve the conditions for business productivity. Among the issues taken up were infrastructure, energy, taxation, private-public partnerships, public management – and education. The commission devoted a 200 pages report to education and innovation (Produktivitetsudvalget 2014), discussing and giving recommendation for all levels of education. However, it was primarily in higher education that the report had impact. The Commission argued that the high level of Danish study grants (SU) gave students too little motivation for choosing study programmes with a high probability of employment and income. Thus the grants system meant that too many young people studied subjects – like for instance communication, anthropology and literature – that contributed little to productivity. Another argument was that the structure and tradition of Danish higher education meant that most students entering a university did not leave with a bachelor degree, but went on to take a master degree, even though many jobs could be well handled by people with bachelor degrees. In order to reduce over-education shorter degree programmes should be introduced. The Productivity Commission's approach to education was clearly based on a neo-

classical trust in the validity and efficiency of market mechanisms and it sought to strengthen the 'invisible hand' of the market and reduce the interference of public priorities in this.

The Quality Task Force presented a more versatile approach to higher education quality. Its report (Udvalget for kvalitet og relevans i de videregående uddannelser 2015) recognized that the core of education is student learning, the acquisition of knowledge and competencies, that this emerges from the interaction between curricula, teachers and students and that the most important task of educational institutions and policy is to provide the optimal framework for this. The task force presented a critical evaluation of the institutional frameworks in Danish higher education, suggesting that students often devoted too little time to study because of too uncoordinated frameworks and too little teaching. However, it also continued the line of argument developed by the productivity commission. Based on forecasts for the development of public and private employment the task force predicted a growing mismatch between the availability of higher education graduates and the employment prospects. More and more graduates, especially from long-cycle university education, would enter the labour market, but relatively few jobs in the public sector would become available, and so private sector would have to employ approximately twice the number of these graduates than it had done in previous years if massive unemployment was to be avoided. To avoid this, the task force suggested more or less the same measures as the productivity commission: changes in the student grant system and shorter degree programmes in universities. It also suggested that employability should be given more priority in the design of study programmes.

The message from these two expert groups was different from the line of policy that the Thorning-Schmidt government had initially presented. The original priority had been to give more young people access to higher education; but also to have them finish quickly in order to get jobs, earn wages, pay taxes and contribute to economic growth and welfare. The expert groups cautioned that the expansion of higher education had to be balanced and controlled in order to avoid mismatches.

Political response was quick. The Minister of Education and Research endorsed the general messages from the expert groups, although he avoided committing himself to the specific recommendations. As early as in the summer of 2014 an agreement on 'growth measures' between the government and the major opposition parties included an increased use of the state's right to limit enrolment in higher education programmes. And later that year Government launched a scheme for 'adjustment of student intake' in higher education. The system is complex, but in principle mechanical: higher education institutions have to reduce the intake of students into programmes where unemployment 1½ year after graduation is 2 pct. higher than average graduate unemployment. The system provoked much protest in the higher education sector, perhaps especially because institutions which had been encouraged to enrol as many students as possible and had planned on the basis of that now suddenly had reverse and reduce resources and staff. But at the political level there were few objections.

In sum the higher education initiatives of the Thorning-Schmidt government were dominated by administrative considerations and the competitiveness agenda. Initially there were two primary objectives, (1) giving more young people a higher education degree and (2) streamlining the higher education system in order to avoid internal barriers and improve efficiency. The first objective can be said to combine the ambition social equality with the attempt to improve competitiveness by increasing the supply of manpower; but it was given up when the expert groups (and stakeholders, not least in business) strongly recommended a different course. In the end the progress reform and

the adjustment of student intake, which mainly represented an administrative logic, came to dominate the policy.

4. The platform and the policy

The government platform was characterised by a strong emphasis on improving the state of Danish economy. This included living up to the restrictions on public expenditure prescribed (but not imposed, it should be noted) by the EU Stability and Growth Pact and trying to improve the productivity of the Danish economy by incentives to business and streamlining of the public sector. Many other objectives were subordinated to this. Improving social equality, which had been prominent in the programmes of the two socialist parties before the election, came out as a more marginal objective in the platform.

The Danish economy did in fact improve significantly during the almost four years of the Thorning-Schmidt government. In a comment on the 2015 Danish election the Economist wrote:

(Thorning-Schmidt) ‘leaves office with an impressive record. When she succeeded Mr Rasmussen in 2011, she inherited a dismal economy and a government budget deep in arrears. She dropped many of her own campaign promises in order to attack the deficit, to the discomfiture of many in her own party's left wing. The government ran a surplus of 1.2% in 2014, unemployment has fallen to 6.3%, and growth is expected to hit 1.5% this year’ (Economist, June 19, 2015).

It can of course be discussed if economic improvements should be measured this way and whether improvements like the fall in unemployment were results of government policy or reflected a general economic upturn after the financial crisis. But there is no doubt that government had worked hard on realizing its economic policy, and with some success.

The emphasis on the economy influenced education policy in several ways. The policy included:

- Measures to keep down public expenditure for education. The most obvious example was the ‘progress reform’ in higher education, but the policy of inclusion in Folkeskole can also be counted in, although it was officially motivated by other considerations.
- Measures to increase labour supply. The vocational education reform, with its benchmarks for the share of young people to choose a vocational upper secondary programme, is an obvious example. In labour market policy (not discussed in this paper) government also introduced strong measures for forcing unemployed people to participate in education and training.
- Measures to increase productivity. The proposals from the Productivity Commission were welcomed by government, especially the suggestions for increasing public sector efficiency. Better local management in education was part of this, and in connection with the Folkeskole reform this led to open conflict with the teacher’s organisation. The progress reform with its attempt to streamline higher education programmes can also be seen as an example of this.

These measures are in line with the competition state approach. Some of them in fact represent an even more narrow approach because they prioritise short-term budget balance over investments in useful resources.

Increased social equality was one of the government’s objectives, and education policy was a key policy area for this. Especially the reform proposals for the ‘Folkeskole’ and upper secondary

education emphasized this by stating that school should ‘reduce the impact of social background on student achievement’. The reforms also signalled a concern for welfare by introducing student well-being as a general objective.

While the concern for social equality was clearly visible in the reform initiatives in primary and secondary schooling, it was more or less invisible in the higher education reform initiatives. It is significant that the role of student grants as a social equaliser, which has earlier been emphasized by Social Democratic governments, was not a theme for government. And when the objective of enrolling more young people in higher education, which potentially could combine concerns for the supply of educated labour with increasing social equality, was criticized by the Productivity Commission and the Quality Task Force, government quickly changed its policy.

In sum, while the Thorning-Schmidt government represented an interesting attempt to combine the competition state logic with moves towards more social equality, its record remains unimpressive.

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